

# Problem Gambling

Missouri has taken a broad based approach to attacking problem gambling, believing that the solution is much like an old family recipe – leave out one ingredient and the dish doesn’t work. The Missouri effort places an equal premium on awareness, education, prevention, treatment and enforcement. The objectives are as follows:

- **Awareness:** Make the public aware that gambling is a product that has risks and that if used inappropriately it can have devastating consequences.
- **Education:** Educate the public about the risks of problem gambling and how to identify warning signs exhibited by their family, friends or co-workers. Educate the public about how to deal with a problem gambler and the treatment and prevention services that are available. Establish and maintain a properly educated network of professional counselors, volunteers and clergy to help treat and counsel those who suffer from problem gambling.
- **Prevention:** Establish prevention curriculum for gaming industry workers, young people, the elderly and others who are at risk of becoming a problem gambler. Create a network of speakers to give prevention presentations to community organizations. Establish a toll free hotline to catch problem gambling early. Promote research to develop a better understanding of the condition and how it might be prevented.
- **Treatment:** Provide resources for counselor training and free or subsidized treatment for problem gamblers. Maintain a well-educated counseling force. Create a method for problem gamblers to isolate themselves from the temptations of gambling such as Missouri’s voluntary exclusion program.
- **Enforcement:** Do not allow gamblers to escape the consequences of their destructive behavior. If their gambling creates a legal problem make them pay a price while supporting their recovery efforts with treatment. Teach people not to “bail out” compulsive gamblers by covering bad checks or loaning money.

The success of this five-prong approach can be greatly enhanced through the use of an alliance of public, private and non-profit organizations that are interested in helping build awareness about the risks and consequences of problem gambling and developing treatment solutions for problem gamblers.<sup>23</sup>

<sup>40</sup> The program is formally called the List of Disassociated Persons. The provisions of the program can be found at 11 CSR 45-17 et. seq.

<sup>23</sup> Alliance chairman, Kevin Mullally and member Keith Spare will be presenters at the National Council on Problem Gambling Annual Meeting on October 6, 2000. The program is entitled “Building an Alliance of Organizations to Create and Promote Resources to Help Problem Gamblers.” For a copy of the materials for the program, please contact the Gaming Commission.

## Using an Alliance as a Tool to Build Awareness

Missouri's public awareness program has met with growing success because of the efforts of the Missouri Alliance to Curb Problem Gambling (the "Alliance"). The Alliance was formed in December 1997 with the intention of bringing together diverse groups who have the common interest of working on issues relating to problem gambling.

The Alliance consists of both governing members and participating members.<sup>24</sup> The governing members, who share the responsibility of administering the Alliance programs, include: the Missouri Council on Problem Gambling Concerns, Inc., a non-profit advocacy group for problem gamblers; the Missouri Department of Mental Health; the Missouri Gaming Commission; the Missouri Lottery; and the Missouri Riverboat Gaming Association, a private trade organization that represents riverboat casino operators.

Participating members are non-voting members who want to participate in Alliance activities. Participating members can include local government entities that host licensed gambling activities, private social service organizations, mental health advocates, counselors and counseling agencies, education institutions, consumer credit counseling agencies and chambers of commerce.



The goal of the Alliance is best represented by its mission statement, which reads as follows:

*The Missouri Alliance to Curb Problem Gambling was formed to heighten public awareness of the dangers of problem gambling and to promote the availability of treatment for those who suffer from a gambling problem. The Alliance will promote responsible gambling and work to educate the public about the dangers of problem gambling. Furthermore, the Alliance will organize and promote problem gambling prevention and treatment alternatives for all Missouri citizens. Finally, the Alliance will promote prevention and education programs for Missouri's youth.*

One of the centerpieces of the Alliance awareness program is Responsible Gaming Education Week (RGEW). The first of these annual events was held in August 1999 and featured Keith Whyte, the executive director of the National Council on Problem Gambling.<sup>25</sup> The week was highlighted by seminars in Kansas City and St. Louis that featured noted gambling researchers Dr. Linda Cottler and Dr. Renee Cunningham-Williams of the Washington University School of Medicine. The Alliance conducted its RGEW 2000 on August 7-11, 2000. Events featured Dr. Roger Svendsen, a noted expert in youth gambling from the Minnesota Institute of Health, and Dr. Carl Braunlich, from Purdue University.

<sup>24</sup> Current participating members include Life Crisis Services, Dr. Linda Cottler, Dr. Renee Cunningham-Williams and Dr. Lia Nower. For more information on becoming a participating member, please contact Melissa Stephens at 573-522-1373.

<sup>25</sup> Keith Whyte, the Executive Director of the National Council on Problem Gambling has stated that the Missouri program is a model that all jurisdictions should emulate. In addition, during a discussion panel on voluntary exclusion programs at the National Council on Problem Gambling's 1999 annual meeting, Prof. Carl Braunlich of Purdue University, stated that the Missouri program is the most comprehensive, well thought out program he has reviewed.

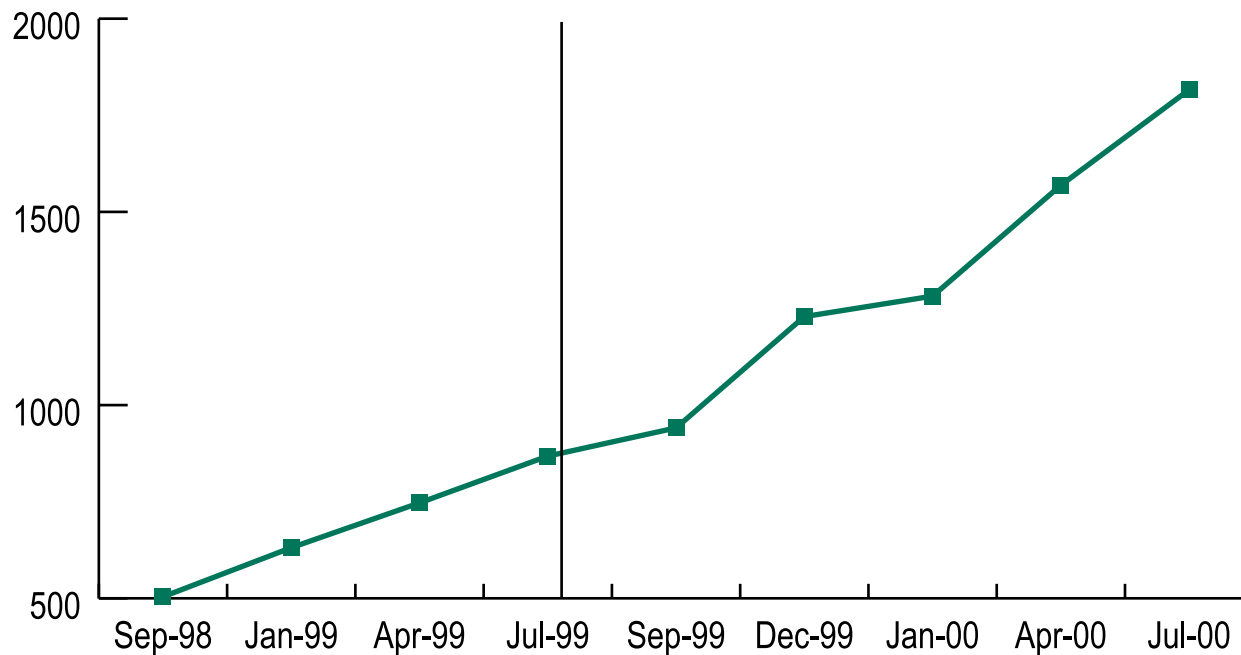
In addition to public seminars, RGEW features training sessions for gaming employees, proclamations from the Governor and municipalities that host gaming, an intensive advertising campaign to heighten public awareness about problem gambling, and the distribution of an educational video about warning signs for problem gambling and services for problem gamblers.<sup>26</sup>

RGEW is an excellent tool for increasing public awareness about problem gambling and the availability of programs for problem gamblers. As you can see from the chart below, the number of persons entering the voluntary exclusion program jumped dramatically following RGEW 1999.

## Voluntarily Excluded Problem Gamblers

Aggregate Number by Quarter

Vertical Line Marks Responsible Gaming Education Week 1999



<sup>26</sup> If your organization would like a copy of this video, please contact the Gaming Commission at 573-526-4080 or write to 3417 Knipp Drive, Jefferson City, MO 65109 and ask for the Responsible Gaming Education Week video.

## Missouri's Voluntary Exclusion Program

The Missouri Gaming Commission administers a voluntary exclusion program for problem gamblers. This unique program, created in 1996, provides problem gamblers with a method to acknowledge that they have a gambling problem and take personal responsibility for it by agreeing to stop visiting riverboat casinos for the rest of their life. The program was designed in response to a request from a citizen to be banned from the casinos because he found himself unable to control his gambling. The Commission first proposed a program whereby it would require all the casinos to ban individuals who identified themselves as problem gamblers.

This proposal spawned a spirited reaction from mental health treatment professionals from around the country.<sup>27</sup> The treatment professionals commented that, while they understood the Commission's good intentions, the rule as proposed did more harm than good. Their comments suggested that the only way for a problem gambler to achieve long-term recovery is for them to acknowledge that they have a problem and to take personal responsibility for it. The counselors contended that the Commission, by suggesting that it could require gaming operators to keep the problem gamblers out of the casino, was allowing the problem gambler to pass their problem on to someone else. Such a belief relieves the problem gambler from taking personal responsibility for their condition.

<sup>27</sup> For a copy of the comments, please contact the Gaming Commission.



The treatment professionals advised the Commission that such a course of action is doomed to fail because the condition is not being treated. Furthermore, they felt that the Commission was creating false hope in suggesting that it could prevent the problem gambler from entering the casinos. The determined gambler will always find a way to circumvent the system. The theory is backed up by a Harvard University study commissioned by the National Gambling Impact Study Commission (NGISC) found that about 1.6% of the population will suffer from pathological gambling. To try to identify and prevent entry of this small percentage of casino patrons is a task that is fraught with difficulty and destined for failure.

Based on the comments from the treatment professionals, the Commission revised the rule and initiated the program consistent with their advice. The program now provides the problem gambler with a mechanism to step forward, acknowledge that they have a problem and agree to take personal responsibility for it. Under the provisions of the program, the problem gambler agrees to accept the responsibility of staying out of the casinos. They agree that it is not the responsibility of the casinos or the Commission to prevent them from entering the casino. They agree that if they are discovered, they will be arrested for trespassing.

Since the problem gamblers are agreeing not to enter a casino in Missouri for the remainder of their lives, it only seems fair to block efforts by the gaming companies to lure them into the casinos. The program provides this protection. The Commission requires all licensees to remove persons in the program from their direct marketing lists, thus blocking enticements such as match play coupons, free dinners or free hotel visits. The Commission also directs the casinos to deny people in the program check cashing privileges and participation in player's clubs. Finally, the Commission requires all licensees to consult the list of people in the program before paying out any jackpot of \$1200 or more.<sup>28</sup>

Once a person is placed on the Disassociated Persons List they can never get off. There is no procedure for removal. The reason for this policy is that those who treat problem gamblers are nearly unanimous in their belief that it is a lifetime condition and that a person is never cured but continuously recovering.

The voluntary exclusion program is not for everyone. It is not a panacea or a quick fix for problem gamblers. The vast majority of people who suffer from problem gambling will need counseling or group therapy such as Gamblers Anonymous.<sup>29</sup>

However, the voluntary exclusion program can be an important part of an overall recovery program. Many people find that blocking the direct marketing efforts of the casino and the consequence of being arrested for trespassing if they are discovered in a casino are helpful components of the recovery process. More important than serving as a deterrent to gambling, the arrest provides the Commission with an opportune time to encourage the gambler to get into treatment. Following each arrest, the Commission sends the gambler a letter reminding them of the available treatment options and encouraging them to get help.

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<sup>28</sup> Internal Revenue Service form W2-G is required for any jackpot of \$1200 or more. Since this form requires the patron's social security number, the Disassociated Persons List can be referenced efficiently.

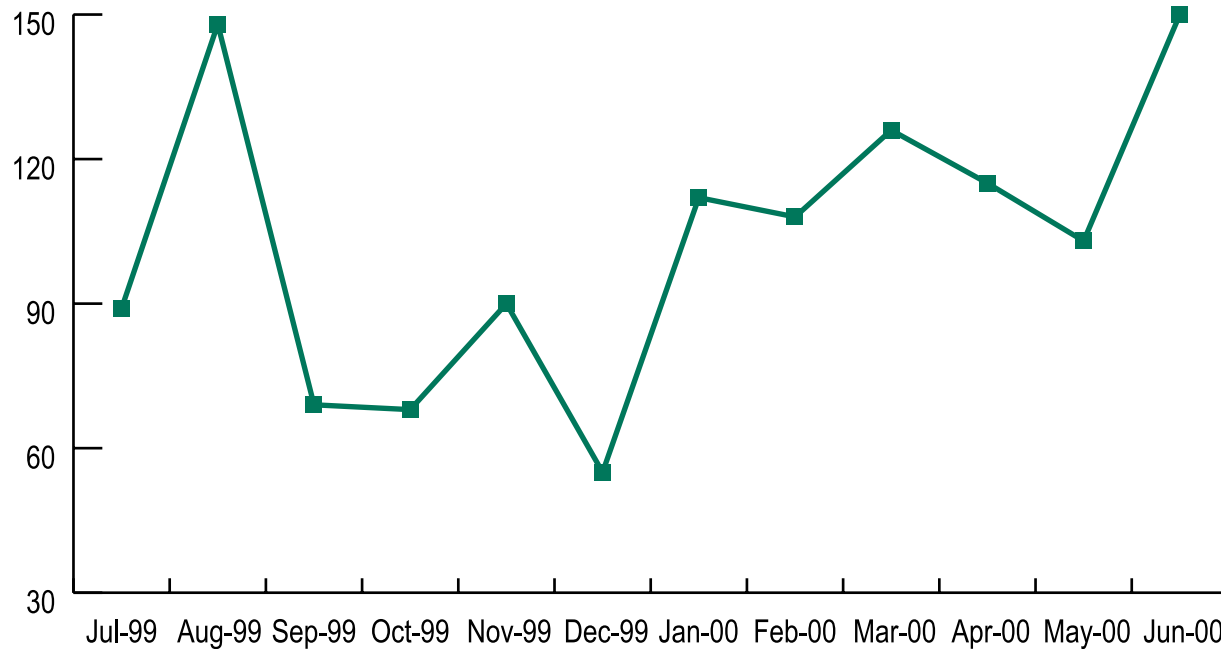
<sup>29</sup> Gamblers Anonymous is a nonprofit volunteer organization that helps problem gamblers recover. To obtain more information about GA meetings in your area call 1-888-BETS OFF or go to their web site at <http://www.gamblersanonymous.org/>

### Counselor Training and Free Treatment

The Missouri Department of Mental Health administers a problem gambling counselor training and certification program. Because of these training efforts, Missouri currently has nearly 100 counselors that have been certified to treat problem gamblers. Certified counselors must be credentialed professionals that have completed a 60-hour training program on problem gambling. The program also requires that counselors complete 14 hours of continuing education every two years in order to maintain certification.

In addition, Missouri provides free treatment to any Missouri resident that requests it. The Department of Mental Health administers this program that uses a network of private mental health providers. The program is currently paid for by contributions from communities hosting gambling activities. Last year, the General Assembly adopted SB 902 that allocates up to 1 cent of the \$1 admission fee paid to the state for problem gambling services. The legislation expands the services that can be provided to include education and outreach.

### Calls to 1-888-BETSOFF Hotline



### **1-888-BETSOFF Telephone Hot Line and Web Site**

No state problem gambling program can be effective without a well operated 24-hour telephone hot line that can assist problem gamblers and direct them to treatment services. Life Crisis Services of St. Louis, a professional counseling and referral agency with over 30 years of experience in crisis intervention, operates Missouri's hotline.

The Alliance is currently designing a certification program for the hot line that will provide independent verification that Life Crisis is delivering the appropriate level of service.

During calendar year 1999, a total of 5,434 calls were received by the hot line, but only 1,034 were callers seeking assistance or information about problem gambling. More than 80% of the calls were hang-ups, pranks, or callers seeking information about gambling.

As depicted in the chart on page 26, the outreach and awareness activities conducted during Responsible Gaming Education Week have a significant impact on the number of callers to the hotline. For the past two years, call volume has increased substantially during RGEW.

The Alliance also sponsors an Internet website, <http://www.888betsoff.com>, that provides information about services for problem gamblers, education and awareness material and research about problem gambling issues.<sup>30</sup>

<sup>30</sup> Another excellent source for a broad array of research topics is the online journal The Wager. It can be found on the Internet at <http://www.thewager.org>.